

PHYSICS

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Physics is the study of how and why things work — from the minute world of the atomic nucleus to the universe itself — within the context of a few fundamental laws. The goal of the physics curriculum is to acquaint students with basic natural phenomena and with the quantitative methods of experimentation and theoretical analysis through which we come to understand them. It provides an excellent preparation for students planning a technical career in physics, engineering, astronomy, or related interdisciplinary programs (biophysics, geophysics, materials science, chemical physics, etc.). In addition, physics supports the background training of biologists, chemists, environmental scientists, and computer scientists. Undertaking a liberal arts physics program enables students to become technically literate scientists who have a broad understanding of the world and can communicate well.

Overview of the Major

For most students the physics major begins in the fall of their first year with the calculus-based introductory sequence, PHYS 130 Analytical Physics I, PHYS 131 Analytical Physics II, and PHYS 232 Analytical Physics III. These three courses cover mechanics, electricity and magnetism, wave phenomena, relativity, and quantum mechanics. This is followed in the sophomore spring semester with PHYS 244 Modern Physics and PHYS 245 Modern Physics Laboratory (0.25). The junior and senior years features more advanced studies in Classical Mechanics (PHYS 374), Maxwell's Equations (PHYS 375), and Advanced Laboratory (PHYS 385 and PHYS 386, 0.25 each). Two elective course credits complete the requirements for the major; students choose from a variety of elective options depending on their career goals. A progressive sequence of courses in mathematics supports the coursework above. Laboratory experimentation and computer-based simulations or analysis are important parts of the curriculum throughout the major. Students are encouraged to participate in research with faculty members and in off-campus research or internship programs, most often in the summer.

Intended Learning Outcomes for the Major

Special Programs

To obtain certification as a teacher of physical science, a physics major must take the appropriate education courses and some additional science courses. The Education Department chair should be consulted for details of the available options. The requirement for a physics elective is waived.

The computer science major can be designed to emphasize computer hardware by inclusion of PHYS 246 Electronics.

Students interested in the engineering profession may choose from two primary options. The option currently preferred by most students is to complete a St. Olaf degree and then enter a master's degree program at an engineering school of their choice. Such a route typically takes 1.5-2 years beyond the B.A. Alternatively, we offer a cooperative

five-year program with Washington University that provides a B.A. degree from St. Olaf and a B.S. in engineering from Wash U.

In recent summers, approximately 5 to 10 research positions have been available on-campus for students interested in working with physics faculty on current research projects. These projects are supported by both external and internal funds and provide a stipend for student physics participants. See the college's Collaborative Undergraduate Research and Inquiry web page for descriptions of recent projects.

Students also may register during the year for PHYS 398 Independent Research or apply to the Oak Ridge Science Semester Program. International programs that can include course work in physics are the British university programs at Aberdeen, Lancaster, and the University of East Anglia.

Recommendations for Graduate Study

Students planning on graduate work in physics, engineering, materials science or related areas should choose appropriate electives in the major and consider additional coursework in mathematics, computer science, or other sciences, depending on the field of interest. Summer research experience is strongly recommended, especially for students entering Ph.D. programs. Students pursuing master's degrees in engineering are encouraged to complete internships in their areas of interest.

Specific recommendations by field of study:

Physics: To prepare for graduate study in physics, students are advised to take Quantum Mechanics (PHYS 376) and Statistical Physics (PHYS 379) and to consider additional physics electives or math courses such as complex analysis, abstract algebra, probability, statistics, numerical analysis, and real analysis. For example, Electronics (PHYS 246) develops skills that are useful in many experimental research settings.

Materials Science: To prepare for graduate study in materials science, students are advised to take Quantum Mechanics (PHYS 376). In addition, students should consider Statistical Physics (PHYS 379), Materials Engineering and Nanoscience (PHYS 362), and/or additional physics electives or math courses such as complex analysis, abstract algebra, probability, statistics, numerical analysis, and real analysis. For example, Electronics (PHYS 246) develops skills that are useful in many experimental research settings.

Civil Engineering: To prepare for graduate study in civil engineering, students are advised to consider Introduction to Engineering Design (PHYS 160), Engineering Design Practicum (ENGR 360), Materials Engineering and Nanoscience (PHYS 362), Electronics (PHYS 246), and/or other physics electives, along with appropriate courses in chemistry, mathematics, and computer science.

Electrical Engineering: To prepare for graduate study in electrical engineering, students are advised to take Quantum Mechanics (PHYS 376) and Electronics (PHYS 246) and are strongly encouraged to take Statistical Physics (PHYS 379). Students should also consider Introduction to Engineering Design (PHYS 160), Engineering Design Practicum (ENGR 360), Materials Engineering and Nanoscience (PHYS 362), and/or other physics electives, along with appropriate courses in chemistry, mathematics, and computer science.

Mechanical Engineering: To prepare for graduate study in mechanical engineering, students are advised to consider Introduction to Engineering Design (PHYS 160), Engineering Design Practicum (ENGR 360), Materials Engineering and Nanoscience (PHYS 362), Electronics (PHYS 246), and/or other physics electives, along with appropriate courses in chemistry, mathematics, and computer science. Quantum Mechanics (PHYS 376) is strongly encouraged for students interested in nanoscale technology and engineering.

Other engineering fields: There are many fields within engineering, both within and outside the broad areas of civil, electrical, and mechanical engineering. These include acoustical engineering, aerospace engineering, biomedical engineering, and geotechnical engineering, to name a few. Engineering graduate programs are typically looking for solid preparation in areas such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, and computer programming. Some fields, such as biomedical engineering, require background in biology or other areas as well. Consult with the Engineering Advisor and specific graduate programs for further information.

Requirements

Requirements for the Major

Prospective physics majors should enroll in PHYS 130 Analytical Physics I in the fall semester of their first year, along with calculus or other math course recommended by placement in Mathematics. It is possible to complete the physics major with a sophomore year start in PHYS 130; interested students should consult with the department chair or other physics faculty member. Students with AP, IB, PSEO, or significant college-level experience in physics may seek advanced placement - to start in a course beyond PHYS 130 - by consulting with the department chair.

Code	Title	Credits
PHYS 130	Analytical Physics I	1.00
PHYS 131	Analytical Physics II	1.00
PHYS 232	Analytical Physics III	1.00
PHYS 244 & PHYS 245	Modern Physics and Modern Physics Laboratory (0.25)	1.25
PHYS 374	Classical Mechanics	1.00
PHYS 375	Maxwell's Equations	1.00
PHYS 385	Advanced Physics Laboratory I (0.25)	0.25
PHYS 386	Advanced Physics Laboratory II (0.25)	0.25
One physics elective numbered above 120 (this is waived for students obtaining teacher certification.)		1.00
OR ENGR 261 OR OR ENGR 290 OR ENGR 291 OR ENGR 360 OR ENGR 365 OR CHEM 371		
One additional physics elective numbered between 300 and 393		1.00
Total Credits		8.75

In some cases it is possible to use the PHYS 124-PHYS 125 sequence to transfer into the major; see the chair.

Remember to check the prerequisites for all courses. Mathematics prerequisites may include calculus, linear algebra, differential

equations, and either partial differential equations or multivariable calculus.

**By completing this major, the student also satisfies the OLE Core Writing in the Major requirement.*

Courses

Students planning to take a single physics course should consider PHYS 112, PHYS 124, or PHYS 252. The two-semester sequence, PHYS 124-PHYS 125, makes some use of calculus and is appropriate for students needing physics to support work in another major (especially biology or chemistry).

PHYS 112: Introductory Astronomy

A basic introduction to astronomy, this course concentrates on how we know what we know. Students explore questions such as "How do we measure the distance to a star?" and "How do we know the universe is expanding?" In addition to studying the solar system, stars, black holes, galaxies, and the history of the universe, students engage in observation using the department's telescopes. Offered every other year. Does not count toward physics major.

Prerequisite: proficiency in algebra and geometry.

PHYS 116: Light, Vision, and Art

Using visual art as a lens, students examine vision starting with light and its interactions with matter as well as optical and physiological responses to art elements: elements; value, color, line, shape, form, and texture. Students scientifically analyze artworks using tools from physics, neurobiology, and psychology seeking strategies employed by visual artists to create compelling images and adopt these strategies to generate original work. No prerequisites, but foundational experience in studio art or art history is valuable. Offered alternate years during January term. Does not count toward physics major.

PHYS 124: Principles of Physics I

This two-semester in-depth course addresses topics in classical and modern physics using algebra, geometry, and some calculus. The course is well suited for students of biology or chemistry or for those desiring a thorough introduction beyond the high school level. Physics 124 takes up the Newtonian mechanics of point particles (motion, mass, force, torque, energy, momentum, and gravitation), Einstein's reexamination of space time (relativity), and nuclear physics. Students attend lectures plus one 2.5-hour laboratory per week. Offered annually in the fall semester. Does not count toward physics major.

Prerequisite: MATH 119 or MATH 120 or equivalent.

PHYS 125: Principles of Physics II

This two-semester in-depth course addresses topics in classical and modern physics using algebra, geometry, and some calculus. The course is well-suited for students of biology or chemistry or for those desiring a thorough introduction beyond the high-school level. Physics 125 explores the character of electric and magnetic forces and fields, then takes up the extended description of matter (vibrations, waves - sound and light). Finally, both particle and wave descriptions are shown to be necessary for discussing quantum mechanics and its application to atomic physics. Students attend lectures and one 2.5-hour laboratory per week. Offered annually in the spring semester. Does not count toward physics major.

Prerequisites: PHYS 124 and either MATH 119 or MATH 120 or equivalent.

PHYS 130: Analytical Physics I

This three-semester calculus-based sequence leads the student through the basic principles that account for the processes involved in baseballs, car engines, electrical power distribution systems, stereos, and black holes. It is the starting point for a major in physics and is also appropriate for majors in fields such as chemistry or mathematics who desire more mathematical depth than would be used in the two-semester PHYS 124 - PHYS 125 sequence. Physics 130 is a study of Newtonian mechanics --- motion, forces, energy, gravity, and rotation. Students attend lectures plus one 2.5-hour laboratory per week. Offered annually in the fall semester.

Prerequisite: concurrent registration in (or previous completion of) MATH 119 or MATH 120 or equivalent.

PHYS 131: Analytical Physics II

Physics 131, the second course in the three-semester calculus-based sequence, treats electricity, magnetism, and electromagnetic waves. Students attend lectures and one 2.5-hour laboratory per week. Offered annually in the spring semester.

Prerequisites: PHYS 130 and concurrent registration in (or previous completion of) MATH 126 or MATH 128.

PHYS 160: Introduction to Engineering Design

This course takes a holistic, process approach to design. Student teams identify human-centered needs, define problems, develop and prototype solutions, test, redesign, and present final recommendations. This hands-on course emphasizes the application of scientific principles, analysis, and design to real world problems. Students write throughout the course to develop and share ideas. In the January Term, students attend lectures and a daily laboratory. In the full semester offering, students attend lectures and one 2.5-hour laboratory per week. Offered annually.

Prerequisites: MATH 119 or MATH 120 and at least one of the following: PHYS 130, PHYS 124, CHEM 121, CHEM 122, CHEM 125, CH/BI 125, BIO 150, PSYCH 125, CSCI 121, or permission of instructor.

PHYS 190: Introductory Topics in Physics

Introductory study of selected topics in physics in a full-semester format. Topics are chosen to engage students in physics based on available staff. Offered periodically during spring semester. Potential topics include quantum computing, astrophysics and the physics of energy.

PHYS 232: Analytical Physics III

Physics 232, the third course in the three-semester calculus-based sequence, explores special relativity, waves and oscillations, and the quantum mechanics of light and matter. Students attend lectures and one 2.5-hour laboratory per week. Offered annually in the fall semester.

Prerequisites: PHYS 131 or permission of instructor, and concurrent registration in (or previous completion of) MATH 220.

PHYS 244: Modern Physics

Quantum mechanics has changed the conceptual framework for our understanding of atoms and molecules, both as free particles and in condensed states of matter. It also guides our understanding of the nucleus and elementary particles. This course examines these discoveries and several applications they produced. Offered annually in the spring semester.

Prerequisites: PHYS 232 and concurrent registration (or previous completion of) MATH 230; concurrent registration in PHYS 245 is required.

PHYS 245: Modern Physics Laboratory (0.25)

This course, meeting once a week for three hours, uses both historical experiments and open-ended investigations with modern instrumentation to examine in detail the important developments covered in PHYS 244. Offered annually in the spring semester.

PHYS 246: Electronics

Modern scientific work relies heavily on electronic circuitry and computation. This course examines the fundamentals of analog and digital electronics, explores the applications of discrete and integrated circuits, and introduces the broad topic of computer control of experiments. Students develop hands-on skills in circuit building, computer interfacing, and programming in LabView®. Students attend lectures and one 2.5-hour laboratory per week. Offered alternate years.

Prerequisite: PHYS 125 or PHYS 131.

PHYS 252: Musical Acoustics

This course offers an introduction to the physics of sound waves, the biological, physical and psychological origins of sound perception, and the synthesis of sounds and sound production in different instruments. Students explore these topics, as well as sound recording and reproduction systems, through lectures, discussions, laboratory experiments, and student presentations. Offered during January Term.

Prerequisite: proficiency in algebra and geometry. Musical experience is helpful but not required.

PHYS 294: Academic Internship**PHYS 297: Independent Research (0.25, 0.5, 1.0)**

Independent research is offered for students dedicated to an in-depth research experience. Emphasis is placed on the iterative process of research, through experimentation, theorizing, and/or computation followed by analysis and further questioning. Students interested in independent research may enroll in PHYS 297 or PHYS 398. Each course requires a faculty supervisor.

Prerequisite: approval of instructor.

PHYS 298: Independent Study**PHYS 362: Materials Engineering and Nanoscience**

This course introduces students to the vibrant, interdisciplinary, and growing fields of materials engineering and nanoscale science. Students focus primarily on the relationship between the structure and physical properties of materials, on length scales ranging from millimeters to nanometers. Students research articles from the peer-review literature that highlight the latest developments in the field. Students also discuss the technological and societal impacts of different materials and their applications. Offered annually.

Prerequisite: PHYS 244.

PHYS 374: Classical Mechanics

This course is an analytical and computational study of Newtonian mechanics, including the harmonic oscillator, central force motion, non-linear oscillators, chaos, and an introduction to the Lagrangian formulation. Students use computers extensively. Offered annually in the fall semester.

Prerequisites: PHYS 232 and MATH 230.

PHYS 375: Maxwell's Equations

This course utilizes integral and vector calculus in a thorough and analytic examination of classical electromagnetic theory and the physical laws on which it is based. Topics include electric and magnetic fields, macroscopic interaction of electromagnetism with matter, and the propagation of electromagnetic waves in various media. Students in this course are normally registered for PHYS 385 as well, in order to complete the requirements for the physics major. Offered annually in the spring semester.

Prerequisites: PHYS 232 and MATH 230, and MATH 226 or CSCI 251 or similar course upon approval of the department chair.

PHYS 376: Quantum Mechanics

Students investigate Quantum Theory, in which a particle's behavior is described through a statistically-interpreted wave function rather than through the concepts of Newtonian mechanics. Topics include an examination of the conceptual framework of Quantum Mechanics, solution of the Schrodinger Equation for systems such as the harmonic oscillator and the hydrogen atom, and approximation methods for treating more complex systems and the interaction of radiation with matter. Students in this course are normally registered for PHYS 386 as well, in order to complete the requirements for the physics major. Offered annually in the fall semester.

Prerequisites: PHYS 244, PHYS 374, and MATH 226 or CSCI 251, or similar course upon approval of the department chair.

PHYS 379: Statistical Physics

How do macroscopic variables (e.g. energy, pressure) develop through the collision or interaction of microscopic objects? Why is the spread of disease in an orchard similar to a piece of iron becoming magnetized? Students study classical and quantum gases, followed by magnets and phase transitions (Ising Model, percolation, renormalization) and employ both analytical and computer methods (Monte-Carlo sampling, simulations, molecular dynamics). Offered alternate years.

Prerequisite: PHYS 244.

PHYS 385: Advanced Physics Laboratory I (0.25)

Experiments in the areas of mechanics, electricity and magnetism, and materials science. Emphasis is on the development of good laboratory techniques, analytical skills, and the ability to work independently. Each 0.25-course registration includes one three-hour laboratory per week. Offered annually in the spring semester.

PHYS 386: Advanced Physics Laboratory II (0.25)

Experiments explore various topics in physics. Emphasis is on the development of good laboratory techniques, analytical skills, and the ability to work independently. Each 0.25-course registration includes one three-hour laboratory per week. Offered annually in the fall semester.

PHYS 390: Selected Topics

In-depth study of particular topics in physics in a full-semester format. Topics are based on student interest and available staff. Recently taught courses include solid state physics, cosmology, stellar evolution, and general relativity. Offered periodically.

Prerequisites: PHYS 244 and MATH 230.

PHYS 394: Academic Internship**PHYS 396: Directed Undergraduate Research**

This course provides a comprehensive research opportunity, including an introduction to relevant background material, technical instruction, identification of a meaningful project, and data collection. The topic is determined by the faculty member in charge of the course and may relate to their research interests. Offered based on department decision. May be offered as a 1.00 credit course or .50 credit course.

Prerequisite: determined by individual instructor.

PHYS 398: Independent Research**PHYS 399: Senior Seminar (0.25)**

Seniors and faculty members study topics of current interest. Discussions are based on journal articles, other readings, library research, and presentations by faculty, participants, or visitors. P/N only. May be repeated if topic is different.

Prerequisites: PHYS 374 and PHYS 375.

Plan of Study

Physics Major - Plan of Study

This is a sample first-year plan that meets the requirements for the Physics major at St. Olaf. This tool is meant as a guide and does not replace working closely with the student's academic advisor.

Course	Title	Credits
First Year		
Fall Semester		
FYS 120 or WRIT 120	First-Year Seminar (or Conversation Program) or Writing and Rhetoric	1.00
World Language		1.00
MATH 119 or MATH 120 or MATH 126 or MATH 128	Introduction to Calculus or Calculus I or Calculus II or Honors Calculus II	1.00
PHYS 130	Analytical Physics I	1.00
Credits		4
January Term		
PHYS 160	Introduction to Engineering Design	1.00
Credits		1
Spring Semester		
WRIT 120 or FYS 120	Writing and Rhetoric (or Conversation Program) or First-Year Seminar	1.00
World Language		1.00
MATH 120 or MATH 126 or MATH 128	Calculus I or Calculus II or Honors Calculus II	1.00
PHYS 131	Analytical Physics II	1.00
Credits		4
Sophomore Year		
Fall Semester		
MATH 220	Elementary Linear Algebra (or beyond)	1.00
PHYS 232	Analytical Physics III (or beyond)	1.00
Credits		2
Spring Semester		
MATH 230 or MATH 226	Differential Equations I or Multivariable Calculus	1.00
PHYS 244	Modern Physics	1.00
PHYS 245	Modern Physics Laboratory (0.25)	0.25
Credits		2.25

Junior Year**Fall Semester**

MATH 226 or CSCI 251	Multivariable Calculus or Software Design and Implementation	1.00
PHYS 374	Classical Mechanics	1.00
Credits		2

Spring Semester

PHYS 375	Maxwell's Equations	1.00
PHYS 385	Advanced Physics Laboratory I (0.25)	0.25
Credits		1.25

Senior Year**Fall Semester**

PHYS 300-Level Elective Course		1.00
PHYS 386	Advanced Physics Laboratory II (0.25)	0.25
Credits		1.25

Spring Semester

PHYS Elective Course		1.00
Credits		1
Total Credits		18.75

For most students the physics major begins in the fall of their first year with the calculus-based introductory sequence, PHYS 130 Analytical Physics I, PHYS 131 Analytical Physics II, and PHYS 232 Analytical Physics III. These three courses cover mechanics, electricity and magnetism, wave phenomena, relativity, and quantum mechanics.

This is followed in the sophomore spring semester with PHYS 244 Modern Physics and PHYS 245 Modern Physics Laboratory (0.25).

The junior and senior years features more advanced studies in Classical Mechanics (PHYS 374), Maxwell's Equations (PHYS 375), and Advanced Laboratory (PHYS 385 and PHYS 386, 0.25 each).

Two elective course credits complete the requirements for the major; students choose from a variety of elective options depending on their career goals. A progressive sequence of courses in mathematics supports the coursework above. Laboratory experimentation and computer-based simulations or analysis are important parts of the curriculum throughout the major. Students are encouraged to participate in research with faculty members and in off-campus research or internship programs, most often in the summer.

Students must successfully complete the equivalent of 35 St. Olaf credits through a combination of full-credit and fractional-credit courses to earn the Bachelor of Arts.

Visit the Physics department webpage for more information.

Faculty

Department Chair, 2025-2026

Amy E. Larsen

Associate Professor of Practice in Physics
condensed matter physics

Prabal Adhikari

Associate Professor of Physics
large Nc QCD; QCD in a magnetic field

Brian Borovsky (on sabbatical Fall Semester/J-Term 2025-26)

Professor of Physics
surface science; friction and contact mechanics; micro/nanoscale applied physics

Jay A. Demas

Associate Professor of Physics and Biology
neuronal biophysics; sensory circuits; retinal neurophysiology

Jason J. Engbrecht

Associate Provost; Professor of Physics
positron and antimatter physics; robotics

Anne M. Gothmann

Associate Professor of Environmental Studies and Physics

Eric L. Hazlett

Assistant Professor of Physics

Suneth Jayawardana

Visiting Assistant Professor of Physics

Shoaib Munir

Adjunct Assistant Professor of Physics

Joseph Paulsen

Associate Professor of Physics

Eric Schilling

Adjunct Instructor of Physics

Matthew Schneider

Adjunct Instructor of Physics

Adam Svenkeson

Visiting Assistant Professor of Physics